

Social media marketing improvement aimed at Russia clients.

Case: Stoke Travel

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<p>This project-based thesis is devoted to social media marketing. The project was implemented by relying on the specific needs of the case company, Stoke Travel. The project objective was to satisfy the case company's needs concerning expansion to the Russian market, increasing brand awareness and strengthening brand position online.</p> <p>When it comes to the theoretical chapter of this thesis, the constituents of social media marketing are discussed. The theoretical framework concentrates on content marketing and social media community promotion, which represent the core components of the social media marketing process. The theoretical concepts presented are then applied to the case company.</p> <p>The discussion part primarily reflects on my own learning and professional growth during the period of thesis writing. It also discusses the project management process and the feedback received from the company, which states that Stoke Travel representatives are satisfied with the project and it has already begun to benefit the company.</p>	
Keywords Social media marketing, social media community, content marketing	

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1 Introduction

Nowadays the concept of social media marketing (later to be called smm) is widely studied by business owners, entrepreneurs, marketing department employees and all other individuals, who possess an interest in efficient online brand communications. Social media marketing strategy creation and further implementation would be useful for any business entity striving to build a strong online presence.

Certainly successful online marketers would agree with the opinion of Bill Gates, who subtly noticed, “if your business is not on the Internet, then your business will be out of business”. Social media is extremely important for businesses. Oliver Blanchard asserts that the core reason for social media fast general embrace and popularity lies in the opportunity it provides for convenient, valuable and meaningful conversations (Blanchard 2011, 4).

The idea of taking social media marketing as a thesis topic occurred due to its popularity, my personal interest and request from the case company. I have implemented this project in accordance with the needs of Stoke Travel, where I have previously conducted an internship involving smm and promotional kind of tasks. Objectives of this project-based thesis are revealed in the next subchapter. The ultimate aim pursued was to reinforce the brand presence of Stoke Travel in Russia, activate online interaction with readers and potential customers via social networking websites, which would positively affect company’s sales in the future.

1.1 Objectives of the project-based thesis

The overall goal of the project-based thesis was to satisfy the needs of all the stakeholders, since the objectives set involve different parties' interests and benefits. In essence, these parties are I, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Stoke Travel, marketing students and all other readers who regard the analyzed phenomena of social media marketing as relevant and useful.

As for me, the primary aim of the thesis was to deepen the knowledge regarding social media marketing phenomena, its core elements and strategies. Subsequently, by efficient application of the acquired knowledge to help my case company improve its smm strategy used for raising the brand awareness in the Russian market. Currently it is one of the essential business goals of Stoke Travel. Also, along with the goals mentioned, to satisfy the requirements of Haaga-Helia University for a BBA thesis writing. The statements of the project objective and project tasks are presented below.

Project objective: To provide the marketing department of Stoke Travel with concrete recommendations for the social media marketing strategy improvement aimed at Russian clients.

Project tasks:

1. Profound analysis and assessment of the current smm strategy targeted at Russians applied by Stoke Travel;
2. Exploration and quality selection of the relevant theoretical framework related to smm and its core components;
3. Generation of useful recommendations for a considerable enhancement of Russians-oriented smm.

The first step to proceed in the project implementation was to profoundly analyze the company's current smm strategy's benefits and drawbacks. Afterwards, based on relevant theoretical findings and personal experience, provide concrete recommendations for smm enhancement, taking into consideration the specificity of online communities together with travel and tourism industry in Russia.

The results of the accomplished project task 1 can be found in the background to Stoke Travel chapter (see SWOT analysis). Project task 2 is performed within the two theoretical chapters: content marketing and social media community promotion. Project task 3 is implemented in the application to Stoke Travel subchapters and concisely summarized in the Attachment 1.

1.2 Structure

The thesis is structured on a basis of Zipper model, which implies that instead of devoting the separate chapter for empirical part, the application to the case company is performed right after each theoretical part. I consider that such a structure enables easier following and more convenient comprehension of my project work for the reader.

The thesis consists of five main chapters. An introduction, which starts with a concise preface to the main thesis topic, reveals the objectives of the project taking into regard different parties involved. It explains the structure of the work, presents demarcation and the key concepts. The introduction proceeds with the background to Stoke Travel, which consists of company's description, product range and expansion plans. The background part is followed by the two core chapters, which are content marketing and social media community promotion. They include theoretical studies on the mentioned topics and concrete advices for practical application by Stoke Travel employees. The theoretical framework is presented in the next subchapter as Figure 1 and explained afterwards together with the demarcation. The final discussion chapter assesses the results of the project from the case company's point of view and reflects on my own learning and professional growth during the period of its writing. The project management methods are revealed there as well.

1.3 Demarcation

The two core components of smm that are content marketing and social media community promotion form the theoretical framework of this thesis, which is further visualized and explained in a detail. Such topics as defining the target audience and consumer research are not viewed, since the case company of this project has already analyzed these issues as a first step of their smm strategy implementation. Also the measurement of smm campaigns results is not included. Instead, the focus is put on setting the right objectives initially and reaching them as a final outcome.



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (Made by the author 2014)

Theory regarding the process of content marketing comes first. The next subjects related to content marketing are analyzed from the B2C perspective: goals for B2C content marketing and content strategy, which includes the context and the content types. Social media community promotion part involves online and offline promotional techniques and the concepts of social media optimization (smo) and search engine optimization (seo) to be analyzed.

1.4 Key concepts

Social media marketing is one of the marketing tools that involves utilization of social media in order to advertise and sell company's products or services (Ward 2014).

Content marketing is concentrated on creation of a valuable and sharable publishing content that would lead to customers' engagement and brand image strengthening (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 10).

Social media community is defined as a social group of any size that consists of members, who reside in a specific online locality, such as Facebook or YouTube, who commonly have the same purposes, interests, or affinity to a certain brand (Savar 2013, 79-80).

2 Background to Stoke Travel

Stoke Travel started its operation in the travel and tourism industry in 2006, which is the year of the company's foundation. Three Australian surfers established the company and located the headquarter in Barcelona, Spain. Approximately 40 international people, including both office and remote employees, are now working for Stoke Travel. By joining forces and capabilities they strive to increase the number of clients by 30% each year (Business plan of Stoke Travel 2014). At the moment Stoke Travel possesses a quite stable customer database that consists of clients from Australia, the USA, the UK, Canada, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, France and Germany. Business is continuing to expand globally, and, in particular, to Russia.

Stoke Travel proposes a huge variety of tour packages for its customers, including surfing campsites, world-known festivals and trips to cities both in and outside of Spain. The company defines its target audience as students and young working people from 18-35 years old, who prefer to travel on a low budget. Stoke Travel sees its mission in connecting people from all over the world, providing them with a cheerful company and creating an easy-going atmosphere. (Stoketravel.com.)

2.1 Product range

Whole product range of the company is broad and diverse. It consists of weekender trips to Spanish cities and neighbouring countries' cities, various activities in Barcelona, massive festivals and carnivals, surfing campsites in different countries and many other offerings. Stoke Travel has trips to propose for every season throughout the year. The whole list of the company's products and prices can be found in Attachment 4. (Stoketravel.com). Among all the products the main marketing and sales efforts are focused on the surfing and big festivals tours. The very first product sold by Stoke Travel, which was a package to the surfing campsite located in San Sebastian city, still remains one of the most popular among all other offerings and is considered to be the top priority product in the company. That package includes such services as tents accommodation, meals, surfing equipment and lessons with qualified instructors. Along

with it, Oktoberfest trip with an accommodation at Stoke campsite is popular among buyers as well. (Derevyanko 23 June 2014.)

Being a student-oriented organization, Stoke Travel strives to keep the product prices cheap. Since some of the employees are professional guides and instructors, customers can receive their service without intermediaries. In addition to that, Stoke Travel has own equipment and gear. These are the main reasons why the company is able to keep prices at a low level. (Derevyanko 23 June 2014.)

2.2 Expansion to Russia

Around one year ago Stoke Travel started to take efforts in order to enforce its presence in the Russian market and raise the brand awareness there. One of the crucial stages for future success is to improve the existing social media marketing strategy with taking into account the patterns of Russian online community.

The travel and tourism market in Russia is quite saturated. However, despite the fact of a high competition, Stoke Travel has a real potential to succeed due to many reasons. Firstly, the company targets youth niche, which is poorly conceptualized or even ignored by most of the travel agencies that actively operate in Russia. Commonly the focus is put on family and children tours at most, whereas youth needs regarding fun cheap tours to unique destinations in international groups of the same age bracket are not that satisfied. Secondly, there is a rapidly growing interest in surfing, the central company's product, among young Russian people. (Derevyanko 23 June 2014.) Thirdly, according to the analytical report of Discovery Research Group (2013), online tourism was recognized as the most progressive aspect of the Russian travel industry in the year 2013. Euromonitor International (2013) also denotes that the importance of online sales is fastly growing in Russia. Internet sales were driven up by several factors, including the popularity of social networks and increased amount of independent travelers. Based on the listed facts, Stoke Travel has an opportunity to build strong online brand presence in Russia.

2.3 SWOT analysis of the current smm strategy targeted at Russians

The social media marketing strategy for attracting target audience from Russia applied by marketing people at Stoke Travel possesses several substantial deficiencies and needs to be improved. I used SWOT matrix as a tool to profoundly analyze current smm operations. The Table 1 provided below depicts the core observations for each sector of the analysis.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the current smm aimed at Russians (made by the author 2014)

Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presence in Vkontakte (VK) social network: regular content postings, good-quality photos• Website in Russian language• Active presence in the other largest social networks	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low engagement and inactivity of VK group subscribers• Poor content strategy• VK group is not suitable for online sales• Weak interconnection of online channels• Insufficient funds and financial resources of the company
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Target niche audience in Russia• Growing industry of online tourism• Interest in company's products	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Competitors in the online travel industry

Strengths and weaknesses characterize the positive and negative aspects of the organization's internal actions, whereas opportunities and threats relate to the business industry environment that Stoke Travel cannot directly affect, but should endeavour to convert threats into opportunities.

2.3.1 Strengths

One of the strength of the current smm is the presence of Stoke Travel in V Kontakte (later to be called VK), which is the largest and most popular social network among Russian-speaking users. Stoke Travel VK group started to function around one year ago and at the moment it counts approximately 4500 subscribers, whose average age is 18-26 and who mainly come from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. The content is posted to the group at least three times a week with a purpose of maintaining the interest of the followers. The VK group contains good-quality photos from real trips and events with Stoke Travel, which makes the group more reliable and trustworthy for the customers' eyes.

Not long ago the main website was translated into Russian language. The link to it can be seen in VK group. The website is essential for Russian online visitors, who would like to get more detailed descriptions of the tours and packages or observe a broader photogallery, for instance. What is also important, the website allows customers to independently book a desired trip on convenient date and pay for it online.

Also Stoke Travel is present in the other largest social networks: Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, through which the company successfully interacts with European citizens and Americans at most. However, that can be considered as strength for the Russian market smm strategy as well, because Russian visitors get the possibility to access the information of their interest from various online channels and freely communicate with other Stoke travelers.

2.3.2 Weaknesses

Concerning the smm weaknesses, the inactivity and low engagement of VK group participants is one of the primary drawbacks. The postings normally get only a few likes, more rarely shares or comments. Such a considerably low level of involvement creates an overall bad image and reputation of the group, and, subsequently, of Stoke Travel as a company itself. In order to help the company to overcome that weakness I have put an emphasis on the social media group promotion strategies and content marketing in

my study. Although the content is regularly posted to the group, there is no circum-spect strategy created for it.

Also, the VK group is not designated for online booking and payments at the moment, which I regard as a drawback as well. The group provides all the necessary descriptions of tours supported by photos, but it is not that sales oriented. The dominating part of its content is entertainment. Stoke Travel marketing people should diversify its approach to the content strategy and enable online booking platform in VK.

Another weakness of smm strategy is that all the efforts are concentrated on one social network only, which is VK. In order to influence on target group more efficiently and build stronger online presence, Stoke Travel could enlarge the amount of online channels aimed at Russians. For example, Instagram and Twitter maintained in Russian language could work in coherence with VK group and the website. When all the online channels are successfully interconnected and the brand message is consistent, Stoke Travel could maximize its influence on customers and reinforce online interaction with them.

Insufficient funds and resources of Stoke Travel is another substantial weakness, as the company is not ready to invest much for the smm enhancement. For instance, there is no possibility to hire a professional smm person and at the moment marketing people are responsible for social media channels management. That is why, when it comes to the application to Stoke Travel parts, I provide the improvement advices that do not require much financial investments.

2.3.3 Opportunities and threats

Through the VK group preferentially Stoke Travel can target its niche audience, the potential Russian customers. At present many of the group's subscribers do not belong to the companys' target audience. With the correct approach to content marketing and group maintenance, current unsteady followers could turn into strong and loyal community.

Then, as it was already mentioned in the expansion to Russia part, there is a rapid growth in online tourism sector and increasing interest in surfing, the central company's product. Undoubtedly these external industry factors can be exploited by Stoke Travel for own advantage.

The threat that Stoke Travel may face on its way to Russian market is the pressure of competitors in the online travel industry. For instance, there are plenty of groups on the same topic already existing in VK and some of them have already gained a strong positive reputation.

3 Content marketing

This chapter is devoted to the study of content marketing, which is analyzed from the B2C (business-to-consumer) perspective. An insight on content marketing concept is provided and the main elements it consists of are covered. Being the core parts of social media marketing, useful content and its supporting strategy implementation can provide substantial benefits for Stoke Travel online marketing operations. The theory provided in this chapter mainly concerns VK group maintenance, which is currently the essential channel enabling Stoke Travel online presence and functioning in Russian market. However, it can also be successfully applied for other communities in social networks aimed at Russian customers, which will be created in the future in order to enlarge the brand influence.

3.1 Content marketing process

Content marketing is seen as a marketing method of an online brand promotion that involves creation and spreading of valuable, useful and relevant information with the purpose of target audience attraction and enforcing profitable customer action. Virtually in any business niche, and in BtoC segment in particular, there is a huge opportunity to expand the impact on the audience through a qualified content. (Content Marketing Institute 2014.) That is why in today's business world content marketing should become a foundation for a business' marketing strategy. Rose and Pulizzi (2011, 9), in their book on managing the content marketing, state that the primary task for marketing people today is more about creation of loyal and passionate subscribers for a brand, rather than finding new clients and enlarging a customer database, as it was done in the past. Businesses have an opportunity to take an active part and role in their customers' lives by proposing relevant content for their target group. The Figure 2 that is presented below shows the stages involved in the implementation of content marketing strategy.

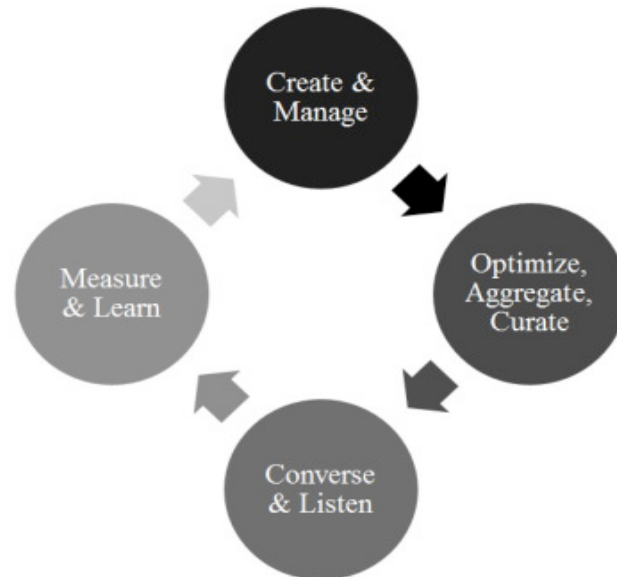


Figure 2. The content marketing process (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 98)

The actual creation of the content compelling to the audience comes first and can be considered as the most important and fundamental stage. The following one is the optimization of the content with the purpose of making it useful and ensuring the aggregation of content creativity, communication, engagement and persuasiveness. Also the optimization of the text for search engines is important. The next task for content marketers lies in lively online interaction with users. After the content is posted, it is necessary to continue staying focused, manage the conversation with the audience. The final stage is measuring the effectiveness of the content postings and learning new techniques for its improvement and stronger influence. (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 98-100.)

3.2 B2C content marketing goals

Along with the good quality content creation content marketers should take into account many various factors, such as compatibility of content with business' goals, most appropriate kinds of content to use and in which proportional parts, target audience habits, search engine and social media optimization, etc. The most significant elements of a successful B2C content marketing strategy are described further in this chapter, starting with setting the objectives.

Rose and Pulizzi (2011, 28) accentuate the importance of content strategy correspondence to a company's business objectives and insist that every part of content should support a measurable marketing or business goal. In other words, each single content part should be assigned to one of the business objectives ideally.

What is more, the greater the specificity of the goal is, the better the final results are. Such approach aids in making the content more useful. It helps to avoid purposeless efforts in creating the content that is annoying for users and does not truly correspond to any business goal. (Kissane 8 March 2011.)



Figure 3: Organizational goals for B2C content marketing (Content Marketing Institute & MarketingProfs 2013)

The Figure 3 presented above, which was published by Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs conjointly in 2013, depicts the most common goals set by different organizations for their B2C content marketing strategies. According to it, businesses mainly focus on content marketing in order to increase existing customers' retention, strengthen their loyalty to a brand, attract new customers, raise brand awareness and improve engagement.

Savar (1 April 2013) claims that there is a huge gap in consumers and organizations perception regarding the online interaction between those two via social media. Online marketers should consider the objectives of customers for following a brand in social media.



Figure 4: Perception gap among consumers and brands (IBM Institute for Business Value 2011)

The Figure 4 demonstrates the research and survey results conducted by IBM Institute for Business Value in 2011, which companies need to take into account pertaining to content marketing in order to be aware of their customers' goals and motives. Apart from setting the organizational goals for content marketing campaigns, organizations that are present in social media should also understand who their target audience is and why group followers would have an interest in their company at that specific time period.

3.3 Content strategy

The inherited components of content strategy are presented in this section of the chapter. Content marketing and content strategy terms are often mixed up, which can lead to disorganization and confusion concerning the strategies to plan and tasks to accomplish within the organization. Content strategy can be considered as a core part of the

whole content marketing. It concentrates on content creation process, on making it useful and effective. Rose (16 October 2013) supposes that content strategy should be perceived and managed as an organization's strategic asset.

Based on Kissane (8 March 2011) conclusions, good content is the one that obtains the following characteristics:

- Appropriate
- Useful
- Clear
- Concise
- Consistent.

By appropriate the author means that the content should perfectly accomplish the goals of the user and the organization, it should be able to work for both perspectives at the same time. Good quality content is correct and appropriate in its style, structure and its method of delivery. Kissane also recommends making the texts utterly clear for the reader and keeping the overall consistency in style and messages. Likewise the content is better to be concise. Rouhianen (2012, 32) recommends avoiding long texts as well, because people usually ignore such postings for different reasons. The advisable length for a post is 80 characters or even less.

For social media group moderators it is also useful to keep in mind that engagement rates are normally the highest on Thursdays and Fridays. Rouhiainen states that on these days readers' engagement is normally 18% higher comparing to other days of the week (Rouhiainen 2012, 32).

The next important feature of content strategy is its correspondence to business goals, or usefulness. The goals for content strategy can overlap with the business objectives for the content marketing, or they can be even more specific and narrow. The examples of the objectives set for content strategy specifically are the next ones: demonstrat-

ing the benefits of a particular product or sharing recent customers' experience stories (Kissane 8 March 2011.)

3.3.1 Content types

In the opinion of Kaplunov (2014, 37) an Internet author should be unpredictable. In his book on content marketing, the author states that the correct alternation and mix of the material is highly important to keep readers interested. It is an important task for a company's smm strategy implementation, to benefit from various kinds of content and decide on their most appropriate proportional parts to use.

Based on the conclusions made by Rumyantsev (2013) in his series of online articles devoted to content marketing, content could be divided into five broad categories. These categories are described below.

Advertising content

Advertising, or selling, is a fundamental type of content that can potentially enable online sales via social media communities. It is the presence of an advertising content that differentiates sales-oriented online communities from any other simply interests-based groups. Typically through that type of content company points out the benefits of a product and provides a description of its features. Advertising content allows a reader to get acquainted with a company's offerings and sometimes with the underlying story of its products. However, Rumyantsev (26 July 2013) states that such content would be more beneficial when using in publics with a strong, more or less stable community of readers, who already have a desire to get more information about a company and its products.

The common mistake of business publics in social media is an excessive concentration on advertising content, especially at the early stages of a group development. As a rule, it negatively impacts on a group image and can reduce the amount of subscribers. It is widely known that people come to social networks primarily for communication and entertainment. Only in the last instance they would be interested in making purchases.

That is why an important task for group moderators is to compute an appropriate proportional percentage of advertising content usage in relation to other types of content. (Rumyantsev 26 July 2013.)

Entertaining content

Entertaining type of content is one of the most frequently used in many online communities, because as it was already emphasized in the previous paragraph, many social network visitors come for entertainment purposes. Many online marketers put the main emphasis and base their content marketing strategy exclusively on entertainment, because it is regarded as the most shared viral kind of content, which helps to create a bigger inflow of subscribers in quite fast terms. With the use of entertaining content companies have a possibility to embrace larger audience, both from their target group and not (Internet Marketing 2013).

Humor, being the most popular content in VK communities, is undoubtedly the main part of entertaining content. Apart from humor, entertaining content might be presented in many other formats, like interesting articles or riddles, and can be either connected to the company's main business topic or not. Sometimes entertainment and advertising elements are combined. For instance, it happens when companies that operate in creative industries post beautiful professionally edited photos of their products. (Rumyantsev 26 July 2013.)

Communicative content

The primary aim of communicative content is to stimulate active discussions within social media group. Ideally such postings should cause a desire to leave comments and share opinions.

The most part of the communication-oriented posts should end up with a question mark, since such posts normally have a 15% higher engagement rate. Also the use of interrogative words, like where or when, helps to stimulate discussions within the

group and induce readers to leave comments. The use of action verbs, such as check, tell, watch, comment, like, is highly advisable to stimulate users' actions. (Rouhiainen 2012, 32-33.) Communicative content does not need to strictly comply with the main community's theme. One of the most popular methods, regularly used by VK group moderators, is a publishment of some highly pressing and topical problems or news from social and political world. As a rule, such issues of concern to the public are the most debatable and controversial. Less abstruse and serious topics can be advantageously used to initiate the start of discussions as well. (Rumyantsev 5 July 2013.)

Rumyantsev (5 July 2013) asserts that the topic of relationship between people can work successfully. Group moderators can also announce the starting time of live online chats. However, the author recommends to use these methods in case the size of a social network group exceeds 10, 000 subscribers, or otherwise, the discussions would probably be too short and would not lead to the desired result. Finally, communicative content can be directly linked to a company or a social media group, implying that in the form of a survey or a direct question, company can ask its audience to leave their opinions concerning the company itself, its products or services, or online groups in a certain social networks.

Educational content

Content can have educational and training purposes. Educational kind of content is intended to provide a reader with any new knowledge concerning a product or an industry. As a rule, qualified educational content contributes to a recognition or strengthening a company's status of an expert in its particular field of business. In most cases a social network page follower, especially a new comer, is more willing to read news and know about new trends in an industry of his or her interest, rather than reading about a specific product or service of a business. Educational content can be presented in many various formats, such as video or audio instructions, reviews of newly emerged products in a market or listing the most successful companies operating in a certain industry, reviews of articles and books on topics closely related to a company's

field of business, professional opinions and translated articles of foreign experts, scientific researches, etc. (Rumyantsev 2 July 2013.)

Educational content can serve as a great source of traffic for a social media group and has an ability to positively affect company's sales. It is considerably harder to achieve the same results with the other types of content, like entertaining or selling, for instance. Qualified, facts-based sources of educational content help to create readers' trust and increase their loyalty. That is why smm managers can accentuate on an educational field, since as business representatives they commonly possess valuable industry knowledge. (Internet marketing 2013.)

Reputational content

News content, which can be called as reputational one, is used to enhance the company's reputation in the eyes of group subscribers. The outcome of that type of content postings is an improved credibility of a company and an increased loyalty of followers.

Reputational content consists of publications of internal company's news and affairs. These can be the reports of recent achievements or less official news about the life of a company and its employees. In case a company is involved in various activities, such as corporate events or conferences, photo or video reports can be shared with social media group followers. Different publications and references to a company in the media or blogs are examples of reputational content as well. Also reputational content may include the feedbacks from customers, who had acquired a certain product or tried a service. Likewise, for a strong positive effect on a brand reputation, group moderators can periodically give or raffle some gifts among group's subscribers. That method can have an especially strong effect in case it is performed unexpectedly. (Rumyantsev 9 July 2013.)

3.3.2 Context in content strategy

When it comes to content strategy, the attention is paid on useful content creation with the purpose of users attraction. However, there is another important element existing,

the user's context that should not be ignored. In order to deliver a brand message to online subscribers effectively, companies should focus on the context of content strategy, which at the minimum level would refer to determination of the right time and place for posting the content (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 78).

Context is user-centric and implies that readers consume information differently. They are always affected by various environmental and ambient factors, like location, tastes, mood, and other variables. Hence, content can be even regarded as useless without a context taken into consideration. (Eizans 26 January 2011.)

Eizans (26 January 2011), the content strategist and context analyser, developed an approach to personal-behavioral context consisting of three areas: physical, emotional and cognitive factors. It is presented below and described afterwards.

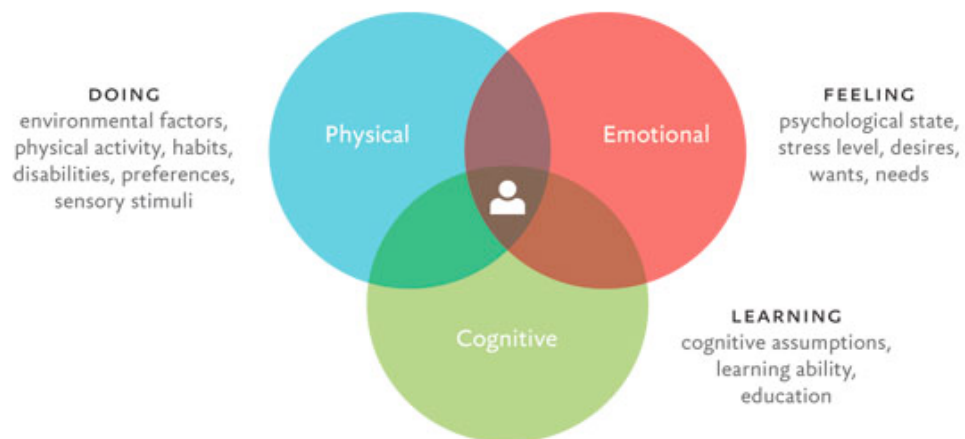


Figure 5: Personal-behavioral context (Eizans 2011)

Physical factors of the context figure stand for the activities users are doing at the time of accessing content, their daily habits and affecting environment around them. Emotional area relates to readers' mood, level of stress, current needs and desires, etc. Finally, cognitive factor involves learning abilities and educational level of the audience.

3.4 Application to Stoke Travel

The marketing team of Stoke Travel themselves admit that the current content strategy aimed for Russian online community maintenance is quite poor and has not been sufficiently developed yet. That is an underlying reason for VK group subscribers' inactivity and low level of engagement.

At first Stoke Travel marketers have to diversify the nature of content, improve its quality and simultaneously enhance social media group maintenance strategy, regarding, for instance, the time of postings, in pursuit of an efficient online interaction with their customers. Relying on the preceding theory regarding content marketing and content strategy, I have generated useful enhancement recommendations that Stoke Travel marketing team could further embody in reality.

3.4.1 Content modification and enhancement

Starting from a more general level, Stoke Travel group moderators have to maintain the overall consistency in both the content and the posts design. The most successfully operating communities with a huge amount of subscribers typically create their personal design for postings and adhere to it at all times. The simple solution for Stoke Travel could be adding its logo to every single post and also keeping the same color scheme. Apart from design, the consistency in messages should be ensured as well. Despite the fact that different types of content are utilized, the image of Stoke Travel as a fun agency that inspires to travel should be kept in every content posting.

At the moment the most commonly published content in VK community is advertising and entertaining in its nature, which makes the group postings quite homogeneous. Provided below is the list of concrete advices for group moderators to adhere to in respect to content variations. These advices are generated based on the preceding theory (See p.17-21).

Advertising content

Although advertising content is already used by VK group moderators, an approach can still be enhanced. The community should become more sales oriented, as the ultimate goal pursued is an increase of sales. Creation of advertising posts that would provoke readers to react and respond should be ensured. Instead of unobtrusive descriptions of the company's services supported by photos, advertising posts should possess a direct call to action.

The primary reason for consumers to follow online business communities is to know about the discounts (See Figure 4). Stoke Travel should use that knowledge and sometimes refer to discounted proposals in their postings. At the moment the company is lacking that practice.

Content creators frequently avoid the straight mentioning of Stoke Travel products' prices. Group readers may become irritated while trying to find a price of products of their interest through the company's website. That is why mentioning the price is important along with listing the inclusions and benefits of a particular service in every posting of advertising content.

In conjunction with qualified advertising content, the next improvement possibility lies in enabling the online booking and payments right through the online community, since now these transactions are available only through the website.

Since the Russian social media community of Stoke Travel is not sufficiently stable and formed yet, it is important not to overuse the selling content, as in most cases new coming readers would be more interested in other types of content at first stages, like entertaining or educational, for example.

Entertaining content

VK group moderators apply entertaining kind of content quite regularly. The main drawback is that Stoke Travel representatives rarely create such content themselves and in most cases it is taken from the other VK communities of the same main topic,

which is commonly travel and tourism. Excessive stealing can lower the reputation of the group, as readers have an enormous amount of online communities to choose from, and may prefer real creators instead of thousands of existing plagiarists. In order to stay innovators in the customers' eyes, Stoke Travel employees might sometimes generate ideas and create own entertaining content, which typically consists of jokes, stories, or videos. For instance, video shares from real trips with the company as well as some outstanding photos and funny tourists' stories would perfectly fit into entertainment category.

Communicative content

Communicative content, indeed rarely used by the company at the moment, is one of the most significant types of content, as it enables to build relationships through active interaction with customers.

Like the company does in reality, it should engage and unite people in virtual world as well. It can be performed in several ways that were already mentioned (See p.18). At the first stages of the online group promotion, company's employees can create an illusion of active discussions by starting them and participating afterwards. As it normally happens, other community members would eventually join and share their opinions. Emerging communities frequently utilize that method.

Likewise online chats for social media group subscribers could be organized by announcing the starting time. Many successfully operating VK groups apply that strategy of online chats on various topics. Also, in order to make the company's subscribers to feel more engaged, Stoke Travel can periodically ask their opinion and consultancy regarding the group improvement issues.

Educational content

Particularly that type of content is totally avoided by the company at the moment. Educational content can be used to make the group's postings more versatile. Enormous

amount of useful information can be found on travel and tourism topics both in social media and on the Internet sites in general. However, it would be better to avoid too serious articles due to the relaxed nature of Stoke Travel business.

Marketers of Stoke Travel can provide the readers with some advices and tips on travel related topics, like the list of cheap flights online generators, for instance. Some interesting recent tourism articles could be shared with the audience as well. Educational content has the power to attract more readers to the channel, and, hence, can be used by Stoke Travel social media group moderators once in a while.

Reputational content

At the moment there are not so many posts related to Stoke Travel news and successful stories, despite the fact that the company has plenty of them. As Stoke Travel was mentioned in media and even showed on Spanish TV, these achievements can be shared with the followers to raise the brand reputation. Despite the small amount of products reviews from Russian customers, Stoke Travel obtains many from its foreign clients. These reviews and experience stories might be translated and posted to the group to add the reliability and trustworthiness.

3.4.2 Social media group maintenance

Since the VK group is currently the only platform used to target Russians, the enhancement advices provided mainly relate to it. However, the recommendations could be used for other future social network communities as well.

In order to choose the correct time for postings, user's context should be analyzed (See p.21-22). At the moment the majority part of group subscribers are from 18-26 years old and come from Saint-Petersburg and Moscow. Taking into consideration the patterns of Russian online community, Stoke Travel marketers have to leave the posts in the evenings from 20:00 to 00:00, since during these hours the maximum number of people of this age group are online and fully engaged. The lunchtime from 13:00 to 15:00 can be regarded as a good time for postings as well. However, users would be

more affected by the environment distractions and probably in a more stressful psychological state comparing to evening times. Also as it was mentioned in previous sub-chapters devoted to theory, the highest engagement rates are on Thursdays and Fridays. Hence, it is better to post important content or the one the company wants to additionally emphasize on Thursdays and Fridays.

For an efficient social media group maintenance it is vital for all the online channels to interact with each other. That would allow Stoke Travel online followers to access the information of their interest from a wider range of channels. That is why, company's website and other channels created in the future should be properly advertised through the VK group. It can be done through the content shares from other channels.

4 Social media community promotion

Social media community maintenance, which involves such tasks as content creation and spread, is a foundation and a core part of social media marketing. Along with a high quality content that would lead to readers' engagement, effective promotion is regarded as a key driver for social media marketing success. Rouhiainen (2012, 35) discusses the high necessity of creating a promotional plan for companies present in social media in order to attract target audience and facilitate online communication.

This chapter includes an overview of online and offline promotional tools and techniques for social networking communities. Application to Stoke Travel part reveals how the company can utilize these methods in practice in order to enlarge the amount of subscribers and attract more of the target audience. Also the important concepts of social media optimization and search engine optimization are presented and discussed.

4.1 Online promotion

Despite the fact that there are plenty of promotional methods existing, most of them require financial investments from the company. As I have mentioned in the SWOT analysis part as a weakness, Stoke Travel is not ready to invest much financial resources at the moment. Therefore, in my study I concentrate on both online and offline promotional techniques that do not require substantial investments.

Social media communities' collaboration

Rumyantsev (23 April 2013), in his Internet marketing study, describes several techniques concerning various free methods of online social networking community promotion. Firstly comes a posts exchange, or, in the other words, collaboration between online communities. The method implies that more or less formed groups within the same theme or industry periodically share each other's posts with providing the links to origin. As a result of such collaboration, social media group gets a chance to acquire more subscribers from another community. Ideally these subscribers would fit into the company's target audience category.

Advertising via themed forums and blogs

Secondly, Rumyantsev (8 June 2013) proposes social media group moderators to search for popular Internet forums on the main business' topic and on a regular basis leave posts and messages there, which would direct forum readers to the company's social networking pages. Despite the fact that the popularity of forums is declining, and social networks are replacing them rapidly, there are old forums still existing that were created for certain themes discussions and some of them are still highly visited. Finding the forums where the company's target audience would be active is significant.

As one of the online promotional tools, social media marketers are advised to leave unobtrusive, but remarkable messages mentioning about their business under relevant discussions or comments. That method is efficient in any kind of themed forum, blog and website as well. The main rule to adhere to when selecting the online platform for promotional purposes is its active and frequent visit by the company's target audience. (Rumyantsev 8 June 2013.)

Viral content

The usage of viral kind of content, especially in the video format, can aid in social media community expansion. Such content is normally widely spread and is used by many organizations' social media promotional purposes. (Rumyantsev 23 April 2013.) Morgan (4 June 2008) claims that from a business standpoint, a viral content, no matter created by the company or shared from another online community, should primarily be relevant to a company's business industry, and then cause users' interest and engagement.

Employees' contribution

According to Rouhianen (2012, 36), another way of online promotion of a company's social media community lies in employees' efforts and contribution. Employees could

mention the group in their social network profiles, invite friends and relatives and encourage them to participate in group's discussions.

4.2 Offline promotion

Rumyantsev (7 June 2013) insists on combining online and offline promotional techniques and utilizing all the options available for a maximum effect. Offline promotional methods are summarized below, taking into regard the limited financial resources of Stoke Travel.

Business cards and flyers

The first offline promotional method is a release of flyers and business cards with the websites and social media group's address indicated. It is common for organizations to distribute business cards, where their website page is advertised. The same business cards could be used for social media communities' promotion. The undeniable advantage of this method is a possibility to enlarge the amount of subscribers even without any excessive efforts taken for advertising. Information flyers, discount flyers, business cards of the company should all obtain clearly seen web address of a social media community. (Rumyantsev 7 June 2013.)

Personal requests

The next efficient method described by Rumyantsev (7 June 2013) is personal requests made by company's employees, for instance. They could be asked to advertise social media group every time when dealing with a customer, either virtually or personally. The main purpose is to cause a strong desire for a person to subscribe to a group. Discounts for trips or any other small privileges always function as a good motivator.

Themed events

When it comes to offline promotion, businesses often try unusual and non-traditional ways. Some of them can help to achieve the desired goals set for social media promo-

tion. Rumyantsev (7 June 2013) proposes one of such methods. The idea is to attract new online followers and subscribers for a community by cooperating with any event organizers. In exchange for any beneficial service, business owners can agree with organizers to make the subscription to a social media group as an obligatory requirement for attending an event. Events can be related to the particular company's business industry and take form of a presentation, business party or training, for instance.

4.3 SMO and SEO

Search engine optimization (SEO) and social media optimization (SMO) concepts relate to content optimization or, in the other words, text modification. It is crucial to follow the principles of them both in order to drive the maximum traffic and conversion and, therefore, be able to build strong online brand presence and ensure efficient brand communication through all the online channels involved.

SEO refers to the company's website ranking improvement through the optimization of its content parts. It aims to make the website more visible on search channels via the correct use of relevant keywords (What is SEO 2014). It is widely known that the higher the website is ranked in search engines, the more visitors it has. It happens because online users normally visit webpages they see firstly after search results.

The main function of social media optimization, which is an increase of traffic to the website and, correspondingly, raising the awareness of a brand and products, resembles the SEO. However, SMO should be differentiated. SMO stands for such an optimization of a company's website that would lead to its higher visibility in social media sites, perfect coherence with them and easier linkability and accessibility. In order to implement SMO, companies should focus on making the website content appropriate for mass social consumption. Such content would be shared through social media and bring many benefits for a company. It is noticed that visitors, who come to the website from social media sites are in most cases more interested in a company and motivated to know more about the products and services. SMO is based on the following principles: increased linkability, portable content and easy bookmarking. (Bhargava 10 August 2006.)

4.4 Application to Stoke Travel

In order to enhance the smm strategy targeted for the Russian market, it is vital for Stoke Travel marketers to pay attention to social media groups' effective promotion together with a comprehensive approach to content marketing. This subchapter provides practical recommendations for both online and offline promotion as well as social media optimization. The generated advices concern the already existing VK community and could be used for other social media groups aimed for influencing on the Russian target group.

4.4.1 Online promotional activities

Despite the limited financial resources of Stoke Travel for promotional activities, there are still many methods that could be utilized to succeed in social media promotion. Previously described in the theoretical part, firstly comes communities' collaboration, in particular a posts exchange with indicating a link to origin. There are many business-oriented and interest-based VK groups that successfully operate within the same main industry as Stoke Travel and obtain an engaged audience. The list of such communities can be found in the Attachment 2. Periodical posts exchange can give an opportunity for Stoke Travel group to attract new followers, who already have an interest in the travel and tourism topic. Referring back to SWOT analysis of the smm strategy, online competitors in VK may present a threat for Stoke Travel. However, by mutually beneficial collaboration between communities that threat could be turned into opportunity.

Secondly comes a method of advertising via themed forums and blogs. In most cases readers perceive popular travel blogs and forums as a source of specific and reliable information. Active discussions in forums or simply leaving advertising messages with the link to Stoke Travel social media group could help to attract new followers from the company's Russian target audience. The list of Internet forums that could serve as a place for promotion is presented in Attachment 2 as well.

Viral content usage is also a good tool for social media community promotion. Since the company is not creating it itself, viral videos could be shared from the other communities, for instance. Here an important task for group moderators is to find and recognize such videos at the early stages to have an opportunity to get more subscribers. Despite the fact that this method is free, it requires sufficient time, considerable efforts from social media marketers and sometimes could not lead to attracting target audience and new subscribers.

4.4.2 Offline promotional activities

Starting with a social media communities' advertisement via flyers and business cards, Stoke Travel should employ that method at first. Currently the company is actively distributing English versions of information and discount flyers, primarily in Spain and in some other strategically important countries for business growth as well. The sequential step could be the publishment of business cards in the Russian language, with an indication of the Russian website page and all the social networking communities maintained for targeting at Russian clients. These flyers could be distributed as well in Spain and in Barcelona, in particular, since the number of Russian inhabitants is quite high there, and hence, the number of events conducted for them is high as well. Stoke Travel should also cooperate more actively with travel agencies located in Russia and enable the advertisement of flyers there.

The next method, which is personal requests for subscription, can be used by every employee in Stoke Travel for a higher efficiency. In return for a subscription a small discount for the purchase or a free additional service during a trip, for example, may be gifted. These personal requests can relate to new coming clients, their friends and relatives, subscribers of the other closely related communities and so on.

As I have emphasized before, it is vital for Stoke Travel to strongly cooperate with travel agencies located in Russia. By providing mutual benefits to each other, the company gets an opportunity to enlarge the amount of group followers by taking part in travel agencies events and presentations.

4.4.3 Social media optimization

Stoke Travel has successfully utilized the SEO principles for its website. However, the company lacks social media optimization approach. Currently the VK group and the website, two main online channels for Russian market operation, do not work in coherence that much. The link to the website is showed on the VK group page, but the website is not that much advertised. The Russian pages on the website obtain the information concerning the products and the company itself. No news and events are updated there.

Stoke Travel employees could optimize their Russian website for social media a bit more. I would highly recommend the company to enable the content shares from the website to social media sites. The frequent exporting of content from the website with the link leading to it is an important step to perform, as at the moment online sales and bookings can be executed only from the website. From the technical side, share buttons and subscription options might be added to the website pages.

5 Discussion

In this final discussion chapter the results of the implemented project-based thesis are analyzed primarily from the two angles: the necessity and relevance of the project for the case company and reflection on my own learning, personal and professional growth during the period of the thesis writing. The feedback from the company is provided to prove the validity of the project for Stoke Travel and assess its actual outcome. Also the project management methods that were utilized are discussed.

5.1 Project management methods

Right before starting to work on this project I have been completing the internship in Stoke Travel. That helped to understand the internal processes, current business situation and plans of the company. I was able to see the weak points and analyze how could I help the company to grow and prosper by utilizing my own skills and capabilities. That is how the idea of the project was born: to benefit from the fact that I am Russian originally to strengthen the online presence of Stoke Travel in the Russian market, as apart from knowing the language, I obtain a deep understanding of the culture and certain patterns of Russian online community in particular. What was also valuable during the internship is that I got a chance to have interview-based and simply relaxed conversations with Stoke Travel representatives on different business-related topics and smm in particular. To succeed in this project-based thesis writing I was analyzing many various literature and Internet sources. Also I got inspiration from different speakers and bloggers, since many of them are smm experts, who are willing to share their knowledge and expertise with a general public. Some secondary researches were conducted to support my project, for instance, regarding travel and tourism industry, online sales and particularities of online communities in Russia.

5.2 Personal learning

I consider the whole process of this project-based thesis writing as a valuable and significant experience for my professional growth and personality development. Being the marketing student, I regard the topic of social media marketing and brand communica-

tions as an area of my interest. That is why I was especially glad to deepen my knowledge on these topics from theoretical point of view and have an opportunity to apply that knowledge into practice, by trying to satisfy the current needs of the case company that operates in the travel and tourism industry, which possess a great interest for me as well.

In overall I am satisfied with the results of my project-based thesis written. However, I wish the process of planning would go more smoothly initially. Since I felt a great time pressure, the planning and, hence, the actual writing process were in a sense chaotic and disordered, at first stages especially.

I believe that the implemented project on social media marketing would be successfully applied by Stoke Travel and would considerably improve the current social media marketing strategy focused on Russian customers specifically.

5.3 Company's feedback

The feedback received from the company can be found in the Attachment 3. Generally summarizing the e-mail response I got from the company's representatives concerning my thesis, they are satisfied with this project and stated that it has already started to benefit the company. However, they also said that still more time to read it through in details is needed. As it was initially reckoned and expected, the project perfectly fits into the current needs of Stoke Travel regarding social media marketing targeted at Russians. The secondary researches included in this project were welcomed by the company as well. Company also appreciated the step-by-step guide provided in the Attachment 1 as it sufficiently eases the process of reading this thesis work and saves the valuable time at work.

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Brief summary of project findings for Stoke Travel

In order to enhance the approach to social media marketing:

- ✓ Diversify the nature of content (See p.22-25)
- ✓ Maintain consistency in content and posts design (See p.22)
- ✓ Consider the user's context (See p. 26)
- ✓ Ensure efficient interconnection of all social media channels (See p.26)
- ✓ Use online and offline techniques for social media promotion (See p. 31-32)
- ✓ Follow the principles of SMO and SEO (See p.33)

Attachment 2. List of VK groups and Internet forums for promotional purposes
(Made by the author 2014)

Link	Description
http://forum.awd.ru	Forum of Vinskyi. Popular source that allows to find all the necessary information for organizing an independent travel to many destinations.
http://surftime.ru	Blog about surfing with active readers. Contains many discussions, chats, articles related to surfing. Used by companies and individuals for advertising purposes.
http://www.surfforum.ru	Forum for discussions about surfing schools in different countries, finding travelling companions.
https://vk.com/surfery	VK community devoted to surfing theme discussions, photo shares with around 28 100 followers.
https://vk.com/espana_vk	Group created for Russian people living in Spain, accounts appr. 25 490 active subscribers. Provides free places for ads in discussions.
https://vk.com/ourspain	Appr. 17 560 subscribers, who are mainly Russians living or planning to move to Spain. Obtains lots of discussions and places for ads.
https://vk.com/privetbarcelona	VK group for Russians living in Barcelona specifically. Obtains much smaller (appr. 2 270), but very active and engaged audience.

	Provides a free online ads board as well.
https://vk.com/espanol_para_principiantes	Group for Spanish language learning with 29 200 followers. Has discussion with ads. Can serve as a place for promoting Stoke Travel group and its product “Spanish and Surf and San Sebastian” specifically.
https://vk.com/ibizafamily	Community about Ibiza that contains lots of discussions and trips ads. Appr. 14 340 subscribers. Can be used for promoting Stoke Travel VK group and “Ibiza Weekender” trip specifically.

Attachment 3. Feedback from Stoke Travel

“Stoke Travel’s Russian SMM project has already begun to benefit the company in major ways. Started as a side project with Oksana’s internship, the development of Russian social media presence has now grown to an ongoing and important tool for direct B2C marketing. Even considering the high seasonal fluctuation in Stoke’s as a business (with summer accounting for more than 80% of annual revenue), the amount of Russian interest and clients in the company has increased considerably. Because of the initial project’s success, it is in the plans of the company to grow Russian SMM presence into other platforms like Twitter and Pinterest in the near future.” Andrey Derevyanko, business partner of Stoke Travel

Attachment 4. Stoke Travel main products and prices (Stoketravel.com)

Trip Name	Price (€)
San Sebastian Surf Camp	30-420
Morocco Surf Camp	40-250
Spanish Language and Surf San Sebastian	350-500
Van Surfari France and Spain	180-210
Yacht Surfari France and Spain	330-360
Oktoberfest	60-210
Las Fallas	60
King's Day Amsterdam	180
Running of the Bulls	60-320
Fete de Bayonne	30-90
La Tomatina	60-185
San Vino	150-210
Bilbao BBK Live	60-350
Benicassim Weekender	270-350
Sziget Festivals	180-360
Ibiza Weekenders	150-299
Roadtrip Spain and Portugal	1260-1770
Barcelona to San Sebastian Weekender	220
Pirate Cruise Croatia	600
Andorra Snow	245
Boat party Barcelona	35-45
Cooking Classes Barcelona	23
Waterpark Party Barcelona	40
Barca Game	20
Bike Tours Barcelona	22
San Juan Barcelona	140
Barcelona Weekender	130-140

Attachment 5. Stoke Travel products (Stoketravel.com). From top to bottom: Morocco Surf Camp, San Sebastian Surf Camp, Running of the Bulls.

